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SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTER'S ADVISOR SEES HOPE FOR
BREAKTHROUGH IN INDO-BANGLADESH RELATIONS; SEEKS USG SUPPORT

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

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11. (S) Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina hopes for a breakthrough in Indo-Bangladesh relations when she visits New Delhi later this year, according to her Foreign Policy Advisor Dr. Gowher Rizvi. At the PM's request (and without the knowledge of the Foreign Ministry) Rizvi recently traveled to India for meetings with senior GOI officials to iron out the details of what Bangladesh hopes will be a comprehensive agreement to resolve outstanding bilateral issues. According to Rizvi, India is eager to see the United States "bless" improved Indo-Bangladesh relations, in part to ensure that the GOB fulfills its commitments.

Prime Minister Opens Channel to India

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12. (S) To follow up on Foreign Minister Dipu Moni's September visit and to pave the way for her own travel to New Delhi before the end of the year, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has empowered her Foreign Policy Advisor Dr. Gowher Rizvi to open a separate negotiating channel with the GOI. Rizvi stopped in Dhaka October 24 and provided us a readout on his most recent discussions with the GOI. Rizvi told us (in the strictest confidence) that he had spent the previous week in India. He planned to return to India October 25 before traveling on to Kuala Lumpur and Beijing. According to Rizvi, this "Prime Ministerial Channel" was unknown to anyone in Bangladesh outside the PM's office. Rizvi specifically stressed that Bangladesh's Foreign Ministry was unaware of his activities, as was the Indian High Commission in Dhaka.

13. (S) Rizvi told us that he had met with a dozen Indian Ministers and senior officials, including National Security Advisor Narayanan, during his time in New Delhi. Rizvi said he held extensive discussion with Foreign Secretary Rao and hoped to meet with Foreign Minister Krishna on a subsequent trip to Delhi. Rizvi remained convinced that the Indian Government was committed to reaching a comprehensive agreement with Bangladesh that would resolve a number of long-standing unresolved issues. Rizvi predicted that PM Hasina's visit to India would take place after December 16. In the interim, Hasina and Manmohan Singh planned to meet on the margins of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Trinidad in November.

Status of Negotiations

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¶ 14. (S) According to Rizvi, there has been substantial progress towards interconnection of the electricity grids between the two countries. Rizvi confirmed the widely-held view that water sharing would be the most difficult issue for India and Bangladesh to resolve. Rizvi said the Indians seemed prepared to give assurances on Tipaimukh Dam, but the sharing of water from the Teesta River would be the most sensitive issue. As a first step, the two sides would agree to reactivate the long-dormant Joint Rivers Commission. Rizvi told us his Indian interlocutors had explained that water issues were complicated because they also involved the Indian State governments. Rizvi noted that the 2011 West Bengal state elections would also make it difficult to reach any comprehensive agreement on water sharing. As an aside, Rizvi said he hoped that India's recent experience as a lower riparian trying to influence Chinese decision making on dam construction would help sensitize Indian public opinion on the issue of water sharing.

GOB-GOI Counter Terrorist Cooperation

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¶ 15. (S) According to Rizvi, the Indians were pleased with cooperation on security issues, but saw Bangladesh's lack of CT capacity as a major impediment to fully achieving their objectives. Rizvi said the Indians had pointed to a recent botched attempt to arrest a senior ULFA commander by Bangladesh's police as an example of the problems that remained in this area. After this incident, the Indians had complained to Prime Minister Hasina, who had ordered Security

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Advisor Major General (ret) Tarique Siddique to fix the problem. We reiterated the U.S. belief that the AL Government's commitment to working with India and other partners to fight terrorism was a major positive in the region.

Bangladesh MFA Obstructionist

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¶ 16. (S) Rizvi criticized the Bangladeshi MFA for obstructing progress in several key areas, including Indian access to Ashuganj port and resolving the maritime boundary dispute. Rizvi said his GOI interlocutors had been annoyed that Bangladesh had sought international arbitration on the maritime boundary issue without prior consultation. Rizvi told us the only advance notification of Bangladesh's intent to seek arbitration had been to Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee, who had not passed the word to others.

Bangladesh-India Cultural Track

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¶ 17. (S) After his meetings in Delhi, Rizvi said he had also visited Kolkata for discussions with university officials about Kolkata University's new "look East" policy. He claimed India was eager to significantly expand cultural exchanges with Bangladesh. During his visit to Dhaka, Rizvi had met with the head of the Shilpakala Academy to urge him to respond positively when approached by the Indians about ramping up cultural exchanges.

India Eager to Know How US Will Respond

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¶ 18. (S) According to Rizvi, at several points during his visit to New Delhi, Indian interlocutors had asked how the U.S. would view Indo-Bangladesh agreement on pending issues. He had responded that, in meetings with senior GOB officials, including during Foreign Minister Moni's visit to Washington, U.S. officials had reiterated a desire to see India and Bangladesh resolve outstanding issues. According to Rizvi, some in the GOI were skeptical about PM Hasina's ability to follow through on commitments, and would therefore feel more

comfortable if the US had "blessed" these initiatives. We agreed to convey this information and noted we would encourage Washington to express strong support for improved Indo-Bangladesh relations in future conversations with Indian officialdom.

Comment
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¶ 9. (S) A former Ford Foundation Representative in New Delhi, Rizvi maintains a wide range of contacts in India. Rizvi told us when he was appointed as an Adviser to the PM that one of his principal tasks was to help the PM reach agreement with India on resolving long-standing bilateral issues. Rizvi noted that Hasina felt indebted to India (in particular the Congress Party) for its support during her imprisonment during Bangladesh's Caretaker Government period. Both the GOB and the GOI are fully aware that closer relations will be controversial in Bangladesh. Prime Minister Hasina is, however, committed to taking advantage of the opportunity provided by the AL and Congress electoral victories in the past year to make progress. U.S interests would be well served by conveying to the GOI our belief that improved Indo-Bangladesh would help stabilize the region and would be welcomed by the United States.

MORIARTY